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May 1980

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The Rand Corporation
Santa Monica, California 90406

ON WEANING IRAQ AWAY FROM MOSCOW

Suddenly, after years of neglect, the subject of Iraq is a matter of lively debate. We seem to have lost Iran for the foreseeable future, so the argument goes, and the Soviets may inherit that country through realignment, subversion, or direct invasion. Iraq, on the other hand, is evolving away from its close relationship with the U.S.S.R., and maybe through the right initiatives we can secure its cooperation with the West. If this could be done, they would have Iran and we would have Iraq as allies, and this might cancel many of the effects of the strategic reversal we have suffered since the fall of the Shah.

Certainly the loss of Iraq would be a matter of considerable interest in Moscow, more so yet if it went over to the West. On the economic front, Iraq's oil reserves appear to exceed those of Kuwait and possibly Iran; its current oil exports are exceeded only by Saudi Arabia; and if it were to seize control of the adjacent oil fields of Iran and Kuwait it would soon be the number one exporter and the dominant voice in OPEC. On the military front, Iraq's capabilities are now preponderant in the Gulf, thanks to a massive influx of Soviet weapons and the decomposition of the Iranian armed forces, and Baghdad seems to be on its way, with French, Italian, and Brazilian technical assistance, to the acquisition of a nuclear capability. On the diplomatic front, Iraq's influence in the Arab League is growing; it will host the next "nonaligned" conference; and its geographic position gives Baghdad considerable weight in both the Gulf and Arab-Israeli theaters of conflict. If Iran and Saudi Arabia were the "twin pillars" of U.S. influence in the Gulf, Iraq and Syria have been the pillars of Soviet influence in the entire region, and the loss of Iraq would be a considerable blow to Moscow's grand design.

At first glance, Soviet interests in Iraq might appear to be secure. The Ba'athist regime seems to be firmly in control of the domestic situation (indeed, more so than at many points in the past) and clearly is impervious to military challenges by its neighbors at

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least until order is restored in Teheran and the Iranian army is rebuilt. Iraq's armed forces are still entirely dependent on Soviet support, and its hard line posture in the "Steadfastness" front against Israel enhances this dependence and restrains any consideration of a rupture of relations with Moscow. If we take as our indicators Iraq's militant Ba'athist ideology, its hard line on Israel, its support of international terrorism, and its determined nuclearization program, all the fingerprints match those of a revolutionary state on the march with the Soviet Union as its natural patron.

On the other hand, there are growing indications of tension between Baghdad and Moscow and signs of an evolution of Iraqi policy away from Moscow and toward greater independence if not a reconciliation with the West. While periodic conflicts between the Ba'athists and the Iraqi Communist Party were not unknown in the past, recent executions of Communist figures surpassed the norms that had evolved within the Iraqi/Soviet understanding and obviously caused considerable consternation in Moscow. Saddam Hussein has just negotiated a sweeping arms deal with France and seems to be slowing the pace of new military purchases from Moscow. Since weapon sales are the only real comparative advantage of the Soviet Union in its trade relations with the Middle East and the Third World, and since most of Iraq's oil goes to the West, consummation of the French deal would represent a very significant reorientation of Iraqi lines of communication away from Moscow and toward the West.

In the diplomatic sphere, Iraq is at least partly at odds with the Soviet Union in Ethiopia (where it supports the Eritreans who are increasingly threatened by Mengitsu's Soviet-backed army), in South Yemen, and in Afghanistan (the Soviet invasion of which Iraq, unlike Syria, has condemned). The Soviet effort to penetrate Iran could lead to new trouble, given the vitriolic anti-Ba'athist posture of Khomeini and Bani-Sadr and Teheran's support for a Shi'a uprising within Iraq against the Sunni-dominated regime which Iran characterizes as anti-Islamic. Given the narrow demographic base of the Iraqi regime (Sunni Arabs constitute only 20 percent of Iraqis, while

60 percent are Shi'a Arab and 20 percent are Sunni Kurd), Iranian support for Iraqi dissidents could become a matter of major concern, and the Soviets might be forced to choose between Iran and Iraq. The smuggling of arms into Iraq could threaten both the regime and its oil fields. The unwillingness of Moscow to change sides in a regional conflict from an important ally to an even more important neighbor was demonstrated not long ago by the shift from Somalia to Ethiopia, and for this if no other reason the Iraqis may want to hedge their bets. In the extreme, Iraq could face a renewed Kurdish insurgency, a Shi'a uprising, and even Sunni Moslem anti-Ba'athi dissidence backed by the Soviet Union and Iran. Conversely, the Soviet Union might back Iran if Iraq moved to seize the oil-rich Arab-populated regions of Iran (called Khuzistan by Iran but Arabistan by Iraq).

What is not known is how Iraq will weigh Soviet support in the struggle against Israel, compared to its various conflicts with Moscow and lines of affiliation with the West. Also, will the Soviet initiative in Iran succeed, either in support of the Islamic government or of a leftist successor? And, assuming that it does, will open conflict between Iraq and Iran materialize, or will there be a reconciliation? If there is open conflict between Iraq and a Soviet-allied Iran, the Soviet Union might take a neutral posture, or it might drop Iraq for Iran or even support Iraq against Iran. We have little influence over these dynamics.

Nor do the uncertainties end there. Will the Soviet Union and Iraq resolve or control their differences over Yemen and Ethiopia, or will (as now seems possible) these conflicts intensify? Will Iraq continue to pursue a moderate policy toward Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (as now seems likely), or will it reactivate its old claim to Kuwait (particularly if there is a domestic upheaval in that potentially troubled country) or even invade Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to seize the vulnerable oil fields and establish hegemony over the Gulf?

In the Arab-Israeli sphere, a continuation of Iraq's hard line posture seems likely, whatever happens on the other domestic and international issues. But here, too, there are uncertainties. The reconciliation between Iraq, Syria, and Jordan could be extended to

include forward deployment and prepositioning of Iraqi units in those countries, enhancing the war option, or the Iraqi army may remain within its own borders, limiting its effectiveness and role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Or, going a step further, there could be a break between Iraq and Syria in the context of an evolution of Iraq away from Moscow or in another context.

The best reasonable case from the U.S. point of view would be a failure of the Soviet Union to penetrate Iran, combined with a break between Iraq and the Russians. This would amount to a net reduction of Soviet influence in the Gulf, and would impede Soviet efforts to exploit the tensions between Baghdad and Teheran whatever the outcome of their conflict.

To aim for a full realignment of Iraq toward the United States, however, is unrealistic. Baghdad is fiercely committed to an independent role, and the entire set of assumptions underlying Ba'athist principles and perceptions are at odds with those of the United States. Nor do these differences hinge only or even primarily on the issue of Israel. Even sweeping changes in U.S. policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict, to the point of a complete and total break with the Jewish state, would leave Washington and Baghdad at odds over a host of regional and international issues.

What may be possible is an end to Baghdad's dependence on and alliance with the Soviet Union--a considerable achievement in itself. This, in turn, may depend more on Iraq's growing relationship with France, Italy, and Japan than on a direct American approach. U.S. initiatives on the margin could, on the other hand, be undertaken in the Gulf itself, on the Southern Arabian peninsula, and in the Horn of Africa, which would enhance the likelihood that Iraq will be more genuinely nonaligned. The central principle of such initiatives would be actions that went beyond a purely reactive and defensive orientation, to enhance Western strengths and exploit Soviet vulnerabilities.